

B Formal and informal

One of the most important areas to master in terms of register is the difference between formal and informal English. Of course, there are many degrees of formality, and most written English (including newspapers, magazines and novels) is situated somewhere between the two extremes.

Here is a list of some of the most characteristic features that differentiate formal and informal English, followed by some preliminary exercises. Many further exercises to practise the use of different registers, and particularly to distinguish between formal and informal usage, occur throughout the rest of the book.

Formal	Informal
Words of Latin / French origin	Words of Anglo-Saxon origin
Single-word verbs	Phrasal verbs, idioms with <i>get</i>
Formal connecting words	Informal connecting words
Impersonal constructions <i>it is said that</i> <i>the price has been increased</i> <i>one never knows</i>	Active constructions <i>they say that</i> <i>they've put the price up</i> <i>you never know</i>
Abstract nouns	Modal verbs, adjectives, clauses, etc.
<i>Is happiness possible during unemployment?</i>	<i>Can people be happy when they haven't got a job?</i>
<i>After clarification of the problem areas . . .</i>	<i>When the bits everyone was getting wrong had been explained . . .</i>
Not ending with preposition; use of <i>whom</i>	Ending with preposition
<i>To whom were you speaking?</i>	<i>Who were you speaking to?</i>
Complex sentences	Simple sentences
Use of inversion for conditionals and emphasis <i>Should you require further information, please contact . . .</i>	Inversion sometimes used for emphasis <i>Only then did I realize . . .</i>
No contractions in writing <i>I will, we would</i>	Contractions in writing <i>I'll, we'd</i>

1.0 Vocabulary

A Origin

Why are some English words considered to be more polite or refined, whereas others which mean the same thing are thought rude or vulgar?

English vocabulary comprises words taken from many languages, particularly Anglo-Saxon, French and Latin. In 1066 the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Britain were conquered by the French-speaking Normans. As French was the language of the ruling classes (and Latin the language of education), words derived from French or Latin have been considered more formal than those derived from the language of the Anglo-Saxons.

The table below compares relatively formal words of Latin / French origin with their less formal alternatives, many of Anglo-Saxon origin. It is an illustration of a general tendency, not a conversion table: the choice of vocabulary always depends on the context. Supply the missing words.

Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal
<i>Verbs</i>		<i>Nouns</i>	
to depart	to go	carnivore	meat-eater
to retain	_____	putrefaction	_____
to cease	_____	deficiency	_____
to function	_____	vision	_____
to masticate*	_____	residence	_____
to demonstrate	_____	respiration	_____
to reside	_____	somnambulist	_____
_____	to seem	comprehension	_____
_____	to shorten	perspiration	_____
_____	to end	<i>Adjectives</i>	
_____	to help	incorrect	wrong
_____	to begin	amiable	_____
_____	to want	vacant	_____
_____	to get	insane	_____
_____	to free	inexpensive	_____
_____	to eat	_____	lively
<i>Adverbials</i>		_____	better
subsequently	next / later	_____	childish
principally	_____	_____	enough
_____	so	_____	whole
_____	at first	_____	older
_____	in the end		

\*Bodily functions are an area where the difference of formality is particularly marked.

## B Phrasal verbs and single-word verbs

## Killing a parrot (a true story)

a Mr Lamprey and Mr Pear are neighbours. Mr Pear and his wife keep parrots. The noise made by the parrots has finally made Mr Lamprey so angry that he has broken down the fence between their two gardens and strangled one of the parrots. You are the lawyer defending Mr Lamprey, who is being sued by Mr Pear for the damage done to his property. The following is how your client describes the events to you.

This has been going on for three years, ever since the Pears *came along* and brought their infernal parrots into the neighbourhood. The noise of the birds *got on my nerves* from the very start **so** I did use to complain a bit. I **finally** *gave up hope* of *getting* used to it when in the middle of the night, I heard someone calling out my name. It was a trick he'd put one of his parrots up to, just to *wind me up*! In the morning I had it out with him, **but** he had the cheek to say that the bird wasn't saying my name at all, **and** it wasn't his fault if the bird's love call sounded a bit like "Herbert".

'I didn't know what to do. I *talked it over* with my mates at work, who suggested I *get in touch* with the City Council **and** maybe *put in* a formal complaint. **So** I rang them up **and** they *put me through* to the Social Services. The woman there said she'd come and *check out* the parrots the next week, **but** she never *turned up*. **So** we *fixed up* another time, **and** she stood me up again. They kept on *putting it off* till one day, out of the blue, a bloke *showed up*. He left after five minutes, saying he'd *pass the matter on* to the Environmental Health Department.'

Now you are speaking in court, before a judge and jury. Note that your account appears more concise and less emotive than your client's. Fill the blanks by replacing the phrasal verbs and phrases with *get* in the original (*in italics*) with a single-word verb selected from the list below. Put the verb into the appropriate tense.

lodge	irritate	despair	arrive
contact	refer	postpone	visit
become	discuss	provoke	investigate
connect	arrange	come	

'Ever since the Pears (1) \_\_\_\_\_ in the neighbourhood three years ago my client, Mr Lamprey, has been (2) \_\_\_\_\_ by the birds. He finally (3) \_\_\_\_\_ of (4) \_\_\_\_\_ accustomed to the noise the night that one of the birds started to call out his name. Mr Pear would appear to have taught the bird to say the name "Herbert" with the sole intention of (5) \_\_\_\_\_ my client.

'Having (6) \_\_\_\_\_ the problem with his colleagues, my client (7) \_\_\_\_\_ the City Council with a view to

(8) \_\_\_\_\_ a complaint. The switchboard (9) \_\_\_\_\_ him to the Social Services Department, where a woman promised to (10) \_\_\_\_\_ the matter the following week. The woman never (11) \_\_\_\_\_. Another time was (12) \_\_\_\_\_, but again the woman failed to appear. In fact, this initial visit was continually (13) \_\_\_\_\_ until six months later, when a council officer finally (14) \_\_\_\_\_. After a brief inspection, the officer said he would (15) \_\_\_\_\_ the case to the Environmental Health Department.'

b Now, reverse the process. The rest of the story is in your words. Read it, then complete Mr Lamprey's more informal version by filling each gap with a phrasal verb selected from the list below, or with a phrase with *get*.

'The prospect of another six months waiting *angered* my client. He told the council officer he was no longer prepared to *tolerate* the situation; **moreover**, he felt it was the Council's job to *restore* peace and quiet to the neighbourhood. **Nevertheless**, in the twelve months that have *elapsed* since the officer came, the Council has *taken no further action*.

'Matters *deteriorated* **recently** when Mr Pear's wife Dolores *entered the quarrel*. My client had previously *enjoyed good relations* with Mrs Pear, **but** *all good will ended* when it *transpired* that Mrs Pear had been phoning the police, *claiming* that the Lampreys had threatened to kill the birds.'

make out	turn out	fall out
go by	bring back	join in
get on with	put up with	

'Well I don't mind telling you that I (1) \_\_\_\_\_ pretty angry. I told him that if he thought I was going to (2) \_\_\_\_\_ another six months of being messed about by the City Council and taunted by screaming parrots he had another think coming. I told him it was his job to (3) \_\_\_\_\_ peace and quiet to the neighbourhood. Well, 12 months have (4) \_\_\_\_\_ now and the council hasn't (5) \_\_\_\_\_ anything done about it.

'Recently, things (6) \_\_\_\_\_ worse when Mrs Pear (7) \_\_\_\_\_. We used to (8) \_\_\_\_\_ her OK, but then we (9) \_\_\_\_\_ when it (10) \_\_\_\_\_ she was the one that kept phoning the police about us, (11) \_\_\_\_\_ we had threatened to kill the birds ...'

c Look back at the connecting words in **bold** in the boxed parts of the story (beginning with '**so** I did use to complain'). What is the difference between the connecting words in the formal speech and those in the informal spoken English?

## 1.2 Register transfer

Read the following piece of informal, spoken English in which someone describes a job advertisement to a friend, then use the information in it to complete the numbered gaps in the job advertisement itself. **Use not more than two words for each gap.** The answer to (0) has been given as an example. The words you need **do not** occur in the informal, spoken English. See page 10 for information and advice about this exam task type.

### Informal spoken English

'There's an advert here in the paper for a job that might interest you, Maria. A young airline executive wants a Personal Assistant. The money's not bad – £1,300 a month – but the job's only temporary. The person who normally does the job is off for six months, having a baby.

'Actually, the job sounds right up your street. You've only got to know how to use a word processor and be a bit of a linguist: they're asking for good English and at least one other European language. And you mustn't mind working overtime.

The other thing they say is that they want to give the job to somebody who's got "good interpersonal skills". I'm afraid that means being charming, sociable and articulate. (Never mind, I'm sure they'll accept a rude, sulky delinquent if she's good enough at bluffing her way through interviews!) Oh yes, and you've got to be good on the telephone.

If you're interested in the job, you've got to phone to get an application form. The woman you speak to will also be able to tell you more about it. Then you've got to fill out the form and send it off by the end of February, otherwise you'll be too late. Doesn't give us much time to work on your "interpersonal skills", does it?'

### Job advertisement in a newspaper

#### **RICHTHOFEN AIR**

*Personal assistant (based in Manchester)*

*Fixed term contract*

*Salary £1,300 per month plus paid overtime.*

A young airline executive (0) **requires** a Personal Assistant for six months while the present postholder is on (1) \_\_\_\_\_.

The successful (2) \_\_\_\_\_ should have word processing (3) \_\_\_\_\_, a good (4) \_\_\_\_\_ of the English language and a keen interest in air travel. Fluency in one or more European languages is highly (5) \_\_\_\_\_, as is a willingness to work overtime.

The person (6) \_\_\_\_\_ would also be expected to (7) \_\_\_\_\_ good interpersonal skills and an excellent telephone (8) \_\_\_\_\_.

Application forms and (9) \_\_\_\_\_ information concerning the post are (10) \_\_\_\_\_ from Sue Murphy (phone 0171 606 9999).

(11) \_\_\_\_\_ application forms must be returned by February 28th. No applications will be (12) \_\_\_\_\_ after that date.

## Style and register

## 1.3 Writing practice

Nicole Renault works in Public Relations in Lille, where she shares a flat with Jane, an English secretary. Unfortunately, Nicole doesn't seem to understand the difference between a formal letter and a personal note: the result of her confusion may amuse her flatmate, but is likely to offend the important Japanese client.

Rewrite the letter as a note and the note as a letter. When rewriting each, borrow useful phrases from the other.

37 Rue du Vieux Faubourg  
59002  
Lille  
April 4th

Dear Jane,

I write with reference to your phone call of April 1st.

I sincerely regret that I shall be unable to be present at our shared residence at the moment of your return from your vacation: unfortunately, I have previous commitments, namely a luncheon engagement and a dental appointment.

Nevertheless, please allow me to assure you that not only myself but also a number of my colleagues are very much looking forward to obtaining more information concerning your recent travels and, in particular, concerning Adonis. In view of this, might I suggest a meeting at your earliest convenience? We could perhaps meet at 6pm for an apéritif in the Café des Sports, followed by dinner at one of the more inexpensive restaurants in town? I should be very grateful if you would phone to confirm.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Nicole

Mon. 10am

Miss Akiko Kurosawa –

Thanks for the letter. Actually, I've already got something on for Thursday – there's a business lunch, and then I've got to go to the dentist's – so I won't be able to meet you at the airport. But me and the others are dying to get to know you, so perhaps we could get together as soon as possible after you get here? Why don't we come over to your hotel at eight, and take you out for a bite to eat? Give us a ring and say if that's OK.

Nicole Renault

p.p. Jean Émar, Export Manager.